

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 00275 141231Z
ACTION H-03

INFO OCT-01 NEA-07 IO-06 ISO-00 SS-15 NSC-06 AID-01
/039 W

-----015961 141235Z /12

R 141137Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6442
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 275

FOTEL SENT ATHENS NIACT IMMEDIATE FM DAMASCUS
DTD 13JAN78 IS RPTD FOR UR ACTION/INFO QTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 0275

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: OREP
SUBJECT: CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS

1. EMBASSY REQUESTS YOU PASS THIS MESSAGE TO CODEL FOR CLEARANCE.
2. CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS SPENT 24 HOURS IN DAMASCUS JAN 11-12. THEY HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO MEET PRESIDENT OF PEOPLE'S COUNCIL MUHAMMAD ALI AL-HALABI, FOREIGN MINISTER ABDUL KALIM KHADDAM, AND JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS. CODEL WAS UNABLE TO SEE PRESIDENT ASSAD SINCE HE WAS ENGAGED IN DAY-LONG HEAD-TO-HEAD DISCUSSIONS WITH PRESIDENT BOUMEDIENE. SYRIANS HAD EXPECTED BOUMEDIENE TWO DAYS EARLIER, AND THUS WERE NOT PREPARED FOR OVERLAPPING SCHEDULES. PRESIDENT PLACES GREAT IMPORTANCE ON MEETINGS WITH CODELS AND TOLD ME HE HAD EVERY INTENTION OF GREETING CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS. I BELIEVE HE SHARED CODEL'S DIS-
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APPOINTMENT THAT ARRANGEMENTS DID NOT WORK OUT. SINCE CODEL TRAVELED TO DAMASCUS SPECIFICALLY FOR MEETING WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD, UTILITY OF VISIT FROM CODEL POINT OF VIEW LIMITED. DURING MEETINGS WITH HALABI AND FONMIN KHADDAM, CODEL WAS TREATED TO UNINSPIRED REITERATION OF SYRIAN INFLEXIBILITY. SECOND ECHELON LEADERSHIP LEFT IMPRESSION THAT SYRIA HAS CLOSED ITS MIND AND EAR TO POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN

MIDDLE EAST PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. CODEL REACTED MORE FAVORABLY TO INFORMAL CONTACTS WITH SYRIANS AT AMBASSADOR'S DINNER AND ELSEWHERE IN DAMASCUS SINCE SYRIANS WERE NOT BURDENED WITH HAVING TO EXPOUND OFFICIAL POLICY.

3. MOST POSITIVE THING HALABI SAID TO CODEL DURING TWO AND ONE HALF HOUR MARATHON MORNING OF JAN. 11 WAS EXPRESSION OF KEEN DESIRE TO SEE RELATIONS BETWEEN US AND SYRIA INTENSIFY, BOTH POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY. THIS SENTIMENT WAS REITERATED LATER IN DAY BY FONMIN KHADDAM. HALABI WENT FURTHER TO EXPRESS HOPE THAT IN FUTURE THE DEFICIT IN SYRIAN COMMERCIAL BALANCE OF TRADE WITH US COULD BE EQUALIZED. HALABI INDICATED THAT \$132 MILLION IMPORTS FROM THE US AND A LITTLE OVER \$10 MILLION EXPORTS TO THE US WORKED AGAINST SYRIA'S NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY." IN ADDITION, HALABI STRESSED SYRIAN DESIRE FOR RAPID DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERSTANDING THAT DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE GO HAND IN HAND WHILE DEVELOPMENT AND WAR CANNOT PROCEED TOGETHER. HALABI TALKED ABOUT BENEFITS AMERICANS GAIN THROUGH STABLE OIL PRICES AND SUPPLIES AND ARAB INVESTMENT IN US. HE CONTRASTED THAT WITH TAXES US MUST LEVY TO PAY FOR ITS ASSISTANCE TO ISRAEL. HE ASKED THAT THE US NOT FORCE SYRIA BACK TO POSITION OF HAVING TO REJECT AMERICAN POLICY AND THEN REITERATED BY NOW FAMILIAR LITANY OF SADAT'S SINS AND SYRIA'S VIEW OF A JUST SOLUTION. SENATORS CALLED ON SYRIA TO RECOGNIZE POSITIVE

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IMPACT OF SADAT'S MOVES AND EXPRESSED HOPE THAT SYRIA WOULD EXHIBIT EQUAL GREATNESS BY POSITIVELY DEMONSTRATING ITS COMMITMENT TO PEACE. THEY STRESSED IT WAS NOT THEIR JOB TO TELL SYRIA WHAT WAS IN ITS OWN INTEREST, BUT SUGGESTED THAT IF SYRIA HAS DIFFERENCES WITH SADAT IT SHOULD TALK ABOUT THESE DIFFERENCES WITH HIM RATHER THAN TO REJECT HIS MOVES OUT OF HAND. JOINTLY AND SEVERALLY SENATORS REITERATED THIS HOPE THAT SYRIA WOULD FIND A WAY TO JOIN IN THE NEGOTIATIONS NOW GOING ON. HALABI THEN LAUNCHED INTO AN EMOTIONAL STATEMENT ABOUT THE EVILS OF ZIONISM AND THE INTRANSIGENCE OF THE ISRAELIS. HE WARNED AGAINST AMERICA'S PRESENT POLICY PROTESTING AGAINST DR. BRZEZINSKI'S "THREE CIRCLES" IN WHICH HE IDENTIFIED SYRIA WITH THE SOVIET UNION. WITH SOME HEAT HALABI STRESSED THAT SYRIA WAS NEITHER COMMUNIST NOR DOMINATED BY ANY OUTSIDE POWER. HE CONCLUDED THAT THE US MAY WIN A TEMPORARY GAIN BY ITS CURRENT POLICY BUT IT WILL NOT IN THE LONG RUN WORK TO THE FAVOR OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. (COMMENT: HALABI HAS TWICE SPOKEN IN RECENT DAYS ABOUT HIS IRRITATION WITH DR. BRZEZINSKI'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PEACE PROCESS WHICH PUT SYRIA TOGETHER WITH THE SOVIETS INTO THE "THIRD CIRCLE" OF NATIONS INVOLVED IN THE PEACE PROCESS. I FIND IT OF INTEREST THAT THIS MAN, WHO IS OUTSIDE THE

SYRIAN DECISION-MAKING CIRCLE ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES, BUT IS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE PARTY'S REGIONAL COMMAND, SHOULD TAKE THE INITIATIVE TO PROTEST OUR CONNECTING SOVIET AND SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THIS WAY. HIS EXPRESSION OF PERSONAL RESENTMENT CAME ACROSS AS DEEPLY FELT. I TOLD HALABI THAT DR. BRZEZINSKI WAS NOT IDENTIFYING SYRIANS WITH SOVIETS OTHER THAN IN THEIR BEING RELATIVELY MORE DISTANT TIMEWISE THAN OTHER POTENTIAL ACTORS IN TERMS OF JOINING THE PEACE PROCESS. THIS DID NOT SATISFY HALABI. WE HAVE SENT HIM THE WIRELESS FILE TEXT OF DR. BRZEZINSKI'S REMARKS.)

4. HALABI MEETING WAS TO HAVE BEEN FOLLOWED UP BY MEETING WITH FONMIN, BUT HALABI REFUSED TO CUT SHORT HIS PRESENTATION
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AND FONMIN HAD TO PUT OFF HIS DISCUSSION UNTIL THE AFTERNOON. KHADDAM QUICKLY JUMPED TO THE OFFENSIVE IN HIS TALKS WITH THE CODEL BY EXPRESSING THE OPINION THAT SOME POLITICIANS IN THE US SPEAK AS IF ISRAEL WERE AN AMERICAN STATE WHICH MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO PURSUE DISCUSSION IN AN OBJECTIVE MANNER. WHEN ASKED IF ISRAEL HAS THE RIGHT TO EXIST, HE SAID THAT THIS IS NOT THE QUESTION FOR ISRAEL EXISTS. THE QUESTION IS HOW PALESTINIANS CAN FIND A WAY TO EXPRESS THEIR RIGHT TO EXIST. KHADDAM POINTED OUT THAT SYRIA WANTS TO FIGHT POVERTY AND BACKWARDNESS AMONG ITS CITIZENS SO THEY CAN HAVE A FEELING OF DIGNITY. HE ASKED HOW THE SYRIANS CAN FEEL THIS DIGNITY WHEN THEIR TERRITORY IS OCCUPIED. KHADDAM REITERATED HIS VIEW THAT SADAT'S VISIT HAS CREATED IMBALANCE IN THE AREA AND, BECAUSE THIS IMBALANCE IS TO ISRAEL'S FAVOR, BEGIN IS EVEN MORE INTRANSIGENT THAN HE WAS BEFORE SADAT'S VISIT. SENATOR RIBICOFF SPOKE OF ASSAD'S CHANCE TO BE A "CO-ENGINEER" WITH SADAT IN THE NEGOTIATION. THE TERM "CO-ENGINEER" WAS UNFORTUNATELY TAKEN BY THE FONMIN TO MEAN "ASSISTANT ENGINEER" WHICH LED HIM INTO A PAROXYSM, ASSERTING THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD IS A "LEADER IN THE TRAIN AND NOT AN ASSISTANT ENGINEER." (KHADDAM WAS STILL GRUMBLING ABOUT THIS INSULT HOURS LATER WHEN I AGAIN POINTED OUT THE MISTAKE.) KHADDAM UNDERLINED THE BASIC SYRIAN BELIEF THAT BEGIN'S PLAN WILL FAIL BECAUSE OF THE FIRM RESPONSE OF THE ARAB PEOPLE AND BECAUSE OF BEGIN'S HARDLINE: "BEGIN SERVES OUR POLICY."

5. CODEL EXPRESSED ITS DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT TO FONMIN KHADDAM ABOUT HIS REMARKS AND SAID THAT HE HAD NOT ENLIGHTENED THEM SO TO WHAT SYRIAN POLICY WAS, BUT HAD TREATED THEM TO CRITICISMS WHICH CAN BE READ IN THE NEWS-PAPER. KHADDAM REPLIED THAT IT WAS CORRECT THAT SYRIAN
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POLICY WAS ACCURATELY PORTRAYED IN THE PRESS BECAUSE
SYRIA FOLLOWS ONLY ONE POLICY, NOT TWO.

6. EVENING OF JAN. 11, SENATORS RIBICOFF AND HOLLINGS
ACCOMPANIED BY MRS. RIBICOFF AND HOUSE CALLED ON SYRIAN
JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADER TOUTAH ALONG WITH RABBI HAMRA AND
DR. HASBANI. TOUTAH'S EXPOSITION OF CONDITIONS IN
JEWISH COMMUNITY STRUCK SAME THEMES AS HE MADE
TO CODEL ZABLOCKI (DAMASCUS 96), IN BRIEF THAT THE
COMMUNITY LIVES IN RELATIVE COMFORT AND FREEDOM UNDER THE
ASSAD REGIME AND THAT ITS MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS ARE ITS
UNMARRIED WOMEN AND THE DIFFICULTY IN OBTAINING PASSPORTS
FOR FOREIGN TRAVEL.

7. IT WAS INDEED UNFORTUNATE THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD COULD
NOT MEET WITH CODEL. THERE IS LITTLE WE CAN DO TO GUARD
AGAINST SUCH UNFORESEEN DEVELOPMENTS. CLEARLY UNDER
CURRENT CONDITIONS PRESIDENT ASSAD WILL GIVE PRIORITY TO
PRESIDENT BOUMEDIENE AND HIS EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF THE
"STEADFASTNESS FRONT" OVER US OFFICIALS. AND YET, IT IS OF
GREAT VALUE TO THE UNITED STATES TO HAVE MORE VISITS BY
CODELS WHO CAN SPEAK CONVINCINGLY ABOUT THE CONCERNS OF
AMERICANS AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PROCESS. WHILE SYRIAN
OFFICIALS MAY NOT APPEAR TO BE LISTENING, WE BELIEVE THERE HAS
BEEN DEVELOPMENT OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS,
IN PART DUE TO CONGRESSIONAL EFFORTS HERE, IN SYRIA'S
APPRECIATION OF US POLICY AND THE WILL OF THE AMERICAN
PEOPLE.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: n/a
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 14 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC00275
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780022-0201
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780163/aaaacbem.tel
Line Count: 205
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: d9a763e3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION H
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 25 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3774853
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS
TAGS: OREP, (WILLIAMS, HARRISON A JR)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/d9a763e3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014